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### *Citation for published version (APA):*

Carlisle, C. L. (2018). Habit, Practice, Grace: Towards a Philosophy of Religious Life. In F. Ellis (Ed.), *New Models of Religious Understanding* (pp. 97-115). Oxford University Press.

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Forthcoming in *New Models of Religious Understanding*, ed. Fiona Ellis (OUP 2017).

## **HABIT, PRACTICE, GRACE: TOWARDS A PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGIOUS LIFE**

Clare Carlisle

### *1. "What sort of philosophy do you do?"*

When another philosopher asks me what sort of philosophy I do, I'm unsure what to say. Perhaps I'll answer, rather tentatively, "philosophy of religion," and then immediately qualify this by explaining that I don't do philosophy of religion in the standard sense. This is not because my research and teaching is especially original or eccentric: I meet many philosophers with interests similar to my own. But "philosophy of religion" remains closely associated with a certain understanding of what it means to think philosophically about religion—one which focuses either primarily or exclusively on the cognitive aspect of religion, taking as its subject-matter religious doctrines or beliefs. This applies to both analytic and continental philosophy of religion: for several decades both approaches have focused largely on the intellectual content of religious teachings.

This model of religious understanding is so entrenched and pervasive that it seems misleading to describe myself as a philosopher of religion. I've called the third-year course I teach at King's College London "Philosophy of Religious Life"—echoing the title of Martin Heidegger's 1920-21 lecture course, "The Phenomenology of Religious Life"—to distinguish its approach from that implied by the label "philosophy of religion," which so often amounts to the philosophy of religious belief.<sup>1</sup> In this course we take Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* as a starting-point for reflection on what it means to think philosophically about religion. We consider, for example, the Socratic task of self-knowledge; the role of reason within the religious life; aspects of the human condition—finitude, fragility, uncertainty, love of other finite human beings—that Kierkegaard thinks make the relationship to God both necessary and difficult; the religious significance of virtues such as obedience and courage; the place of silence and contemplation within the spiritual life.

Once we begin to think about "lived religion" and to conceive our discipline as the philosophy of religious life, the concept of practice comes into the foreground. What do religious people *do*—and how does this shape their beliefs, their actions, their states of mind, their emotions, their self-understanding, their world? If being religious

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<sup>1</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, translated by Matthias Fritsch and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei (Indiana University Press, 2010).

makes a difference to a person's life, then we need to ask what these differences are, how they come about, how they should be interpreted and evaluated. In order to think through these questions philosophically, we need a properly formulated concept of religious practice, and I am going to work towards this in this essay.

First, though, I want to point to a series of unresolved questions and challenges that confront this new model of religious understanding. Insofar as the philosophy of religion focuses on religious beliefs, its guiding questions seem clear enough: are these beliefs true or false, warranted or unwarranted, verifiable or unverifiable? But which questions are we trying to answer when we think philosophically about religious practices? What precisely is our task, and what is specifically philosophical about it? Are we seeking criteria and methods of critique, which would enable us to distinguish between effective and ineffective practices, or good and bad ways of practicing? The very concept of practice seems to presuppose a goal, or at least an ideal of proficiency that the practitioner works towards—but this goal might not be knowable or conceivable in advance, and might not even be intelligible outside of the practice in question. For example, “union with God” may only make sense after years of contemplative prayer; *metta* (the Buddhist concept of compassionate love) may only become meaningful under conditions facilitated by meditation; submission to Allah may not be graspable until one has knelt down, put one's head to the ground; we might not understand what forgiveness means until we have asked for it.

Certain questions of method follow on from these. What is our source material? Since religious doctrines and beliefs can generally be expressed in propositional form, it seems entirely natural for the traditional philosopher of religion to make texts her primary object of study. And because critical interpretation and evaluation of religious beliefs has been this philosopher's primary task, her method is the construction and analysis of arguments. But it is not at all obvious that these methods are appropriate to the study of religious practices. Of course, we may read texts written by anthropologists or sociologists who have observed and analysed religious practices, and the practices encountered in this way will be mediated by the methodology of the social sciences. But what would it mean to study practices ourselves, directly, as philosophers? Should we look at practices from the outside, or from the inside? What exactly are we looking at, and what are we looking for? Should we observe other people engaging in religious practices and document their movements? Should we talk to practitioners about their practices, and then assess their accounts for logical consistency? Should we engage in practice ourselves, and write about our own experiences? And might we combine observational, participatory, dialogical and introspective research—for example, by spending a week in a monastery or on a meditation retreat, tape recorder and laptop in hand? Would this be an appropriate way of being in a sacred space? Would it be recognised as legitimate philosophical work by our peers? And what would it mean to undertake this kind of observation and reflection *philosophically*?

Having raised these questions, I shall retreat to our familiar territory of texts and concepts. But these questions are important, and they highlight the limitations of this essay: I have confined myself here to the task of outlining a concept of practice, drawn in part from the philosophical tradition, which provides a starting-point for understanding religious practices in a specifically philosophical way.

## 2. *The practicing life*

Social scientists have been interested in practices for decades, and more recently disciplines such as history, theology, cultural studies, art theory, and religious studies have embraced a “return to practice.”<sup>2</sup> Philosophers have generally been slow to make this turn by reflecting on how particular practices of thinking, intellectual cultures, training regimes and academic institutions have shaped—and continue to shape—their discipline. A few prominent philosophers, notably Charles Taylor and Alastair MacIntyre, have emphasised that practices are important, though without providing an extensive philosophical account of practice.<sup>3</sup> But two recent books, Peter Sloterdijk’s *You Must Change Your Life: On Anthropotechnics* (2009; English translation 2013) and Kevin Schilbrack’s *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto* (2014) have placed practice at the centre of a philosophical analysis of religion.

Sloterdijk defines practice as “any operation that provides or improves the actor’s qualification for the next performance of the same operation, whether it is declared as practice or not.”<sup>4</sup> Taking as his question “the formation of human beings in the practising life,” Sloterdijk makes some bold historical claims. “It is time to reveal humans as the beings who result from repetition,” he announces: “Just as the 19<sup>th</sup> century stood cognitively under the sign of production and the 20<sup>th</sup> under that of reflexivity, the future should present itself under the sign of the exercise.”<sup>5</sup> Perhaps this prediction is correct, though Sloterdijk needs to specify more carefully the distinctively human relationship to repetition—for insofar as they acquire habits, we might say that all animals “result from repetition.” Perhaps Sloterdijk has in mind the concept of second nature that Aristotle recognised as fundamental to our ethical life. If so, the distinction between habit and practice that remains implicit in Aristotle’s account of human formation has to be made more explicit—and I shall address this distinction in the next section of this essay.

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview, see *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, edited by Theodore R. Schatzki, Karin Knorr Cetina and Eike von Savigny (London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Charles Taylor’s *Philosophy and the Human Sciences. Collected Papers: Volume II* (Cambridge University Press, 1985) and Alasdair MacIntyre’s *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life: On Anthropotechnics*, translated by Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

The reception of Aristotelian thought into Christian theology—a reception that is especially prominent in the Catholic tradition, notably in the works of Thomas Aquinas and Félix Ravaisson—provides rich philosophical resources for analysing religious practices. However, Sloterdijk opposes his philosophy of practice to theological thinking as well as to Marxist accounts of human self-production. He argues that human beings are formed not by labouring on the world, but by practising on themselves: “The ethical programme of the present came into view for a moment when Marx and the Young Hegelians articulated the theory that man himself produces man. The true meaning of this statement was immediately obscured [by the idea that] work [is] the only essential human act... We must suspend virtually everything that has been said about human beings as working beings in order to translate it into the language of practising, or self-forming and self-enhancing behaviour. It is not only the weary *Homo faber*, who objectifies the world in the ‘doing’ mode, who must vacate his place on the logical stage; the time has also come for *Homo religiosus*, who turns to the world above in surreal rites, to bid a deserved farewell. Together, workers and believers come into a new category.”<sup>6</sup>

Sloterdijk’s analysis of asceticism is fascinating: he creates a new conceptual framework for investigating what Nietzsche called “the ascetic ideal,” and identifies diverse elements within this complex phenomenon. Sloterdijk advances his Nietzschean agenda by employing his concept of practice reductively. By conceiving of religious practices as “anthropotechniques,” exercises by which “man himself produces man,” he rejects in advance the way in which most religious practitioners understand their own practices: as responsive to and aided by a power beyond themselves. According to Sloterdijk, “No ‘religion’ or ‘religions’ exist, only misunderstood spiritual regimens, whether these are practised in collectives – usually church, *ordo*, *umma*, *sangha* – or in customised forms – through interaction with the ‘personal God’ with whom the citizens of modernity are privately insured. Thus the tiresome distinction between ‘true religion’ and superstition loses its meaning. There are only regimens that are more or less capable and worthy of propagation. The false dichotomy of believers and unbelievers becomes obsolete and is replaced by the distinction between the practising and the untrained, or those who train differently.”<sup>7</sup> This claim that “religions” do not exist, or at least should be reconceived as patterns of practice, is interesting and worth pursuing (if overstated by Sloterdijk, whose turn to practice seems to treat metaphysics and cosmology as mere conceptual debris). But here Sloterdijk, setting belief in opposition to practice by claiming that the latter replaces the former, invokes a “false dichotomy” of his own.

The reciprocal relationship between belief and practice is explored by Kevin Schilbrack in his less substantial but more sober “manifesto” for the philosophical study of religion. Schilbrack diagnoses “an implicit but pervasive mind-body dualism”

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

that separates belief from practice within the academic study of religion, where “the traditional division of labour...seems to have followed a tacit rule that the discipline of philosophy of religion studies religious *beliefs* (the mental) and the social scientific disciplines study religious *practices* (the bodily).”<sup>8</sup> He contests the prevailing view that “religious practices lack the properties found in cognitive activities and are simply mechanical or thoughtless”—a view that causes most philosophers of religion to “leave religious practices for others to study on the assumption that the practices themselves are not philosophical.”<sup>9</sup> He suggests that “most of the studies of ritual inspired by Michel Foucault, for example, treat the body as a blank text on which one’s culture inscribes, the body as merely the effect of discourse,” and speculates that “perhaps it is the influence of Protestant opposition to Catholic sacraments and ‘works righteousness’ or perhaps secularist opposition to superstition that leads scholars of religion to take embodied religious practices as unthinking, and this leads to the assumption that such practices do not involve the kinds of cognitive activity that deserve philosophical attention.”<sup>10</sup>

Schilbrack makes a compelling case for seeing practices as cognitive, “not only as ways to communicate, teach, or inculcate the claims that a religious community wants to make, but as sites of inquiry, exploration and creativity in their own right.”<sup>11</sup> Religious practices are, he insists, “social practices that cannot fail to involve learning and exploration.” By participating in a religious ritual, practitioners learn about themselves—about how they are changed by their practice, and how they resist these changes. They also learn about the other members of their religious community: who is a good role model, and who is unreliable? And they learn about “the world as the context of [their] action.”<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, argues Schilbrack—and here he diverges from Sloterdijk, whose work he does not refer to—“ultimately practices can serve as opportunities for inquiry about the super-empirical resources that make the practice successful. It is this last element that distinguishes between religious practices from nonreligious ones. What super-empirical reality sustains the practice or makes it effective?”<sup>13</sup> Regardless of whether practitioners explicitly reflect on their practices—a process of reflection that does of course happen, both formally and informally, within religious communities—Schilbrack argues that the forms of enquiry he describes are embedded in the practices themselves. His point in challenging the disciplinary divide between belief and practice,

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<sup>8</sup> Kevin Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), p. 32.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

between cognition and practice, is, he clarifies, “that the practices themselves can provide the cultural prosthetics that let practitioners explore these questions.”<sup>14</sup>

Having argued that religious practices are irreducibly cognitive, and thus philosophically significant, Schilbrack offers three models for a philosophical understanding of religious practices. First he proposes an “embodiment” paradigm for the philosophy of religion, drawing both on Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus” and on existential phenomenology, which conceives the body as the “pre-reflective seat of subjectivity.”<sup>15</sup> Second, he outlines an account of embodied religious reason based on “conceptual metaphor theory”: physical experiences generate patterns of understanding, he explains—for example, the metaphor of a spiritual path or journey is one such “pattern of understanding.”<sup>16</sup> Religious practices, Schilbrack argues, “can not only provide the patterns of experience on which religious teachings draw, but can also deploy those patterns to develop and to teach one way of life or another.”<sup>17</sup> Third, he applies the concept of “cognitive prosthetics,” drawn from cognitive science, to religious “material culture.”<sup>18</sup>

My own philosophy of practice follows a method different from those outlined by Schilbrack—like Sloterdijk’s, my analysis proceeds historically—but it shares something in common with the first of his three proposed models. I agree with Schilbrack, and disagree with Sloterdijk, in taking seriously the way in which religious practitioners understand their own practice as engaged, or potentially engaged, with a “super-empirical reality” that sustains their practicing, as Schilbrack puts it. Indeed, it is precisely because practices have the cognitive power that Schilbrack claims for them that it becomes problematic for a non-practitioner to dismiss practitioners as mistaken in their beliefs, or to insist on a reductive account of their practices, on purely intellectual grounds—whether this intellectual perspective consists in armchair scientism and positivism, or fluency in Marxist and Nietzschean critique. Although Sloterdijk tends to project the assumptions of his own formation onto religious practitioners in refusing to accommodate theology, he makes a methodological point that is relevant to precisely this issue: “We are dealing here with an object that does not leave its analyst alone... The matter itself entangles its adepts in an inescapable self-referentiality by presenting them with the practising – the ‘ascetic’, form-demanding and habit-forming – character of their own behaviour... An anthropology of the practising life is infected by its subject. Dealing with practices, asceticisms and exercises, whether or not they are declared as such, the theorist inevitably encounters his own inner constitution.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>19</sup> Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life*, p. 14.

### 3. *Habit: receptivity and resistance, formation and flesh*

My starting-point in thinking philosophically about religious practice is to understand practice as a species of habit. As I have argued in my 2014 book *On Habit*, drawing on Ravaissan's 1838 essay *De l'habitude*, the phenomenon of habit-acquisition connects humans to the whole of nature: all animals—and also, Ravaissan would argue, other organic beings—contract habits in response to the conditions of their environment. Throughout nature, habits are particular, tried-and-tested ways of meeting general needs for light, warmth, food, shelter. Practice is a specifically human kind of habit, which takes the mechanism of habit and puts it to a purposive use, deliberately cultivating a certain capacity through repeated actions. Approaching practice as a kind of habit makes available a long tradition of philosophical reflection and debate about habit, which we can draw on and build upon in clarifying the concept of practice.

Habit is a process of formation. The English word 'habit' comes, via the Latin *habitus*, from the Greek *hexis*, derived from the verb *ekhein*: 'to have' or 'to hold.' Habit signifies the holding of a form through time. Mineralogists refer to the habits of crystals; botanists to the habits of plants; of course animals, including humans, have habits—and in each case 'habit' means a shape or pattern of growth, a particular way of moving through space and time, a particular way of moving through the world. In *De l'habitude* Ravaissan calls habit a "way of being." Drawing eclectically on sources including Aristotle, Leibniz, Maine de Biran, Schelling, and a mystical Catholicism inflected with vitalist science and pantheist philosophy, Ravaissan conceives being in terms of "nature" and "life"—and he conceives "nature" and "life" in terms of desire.<sup>20</sup> Habits are the particularisation, the specification, of desire. Habits are the "way" in which singular nature, an all-encompassing unity, expresses or manifests itself in diverse forms of life.

A fundamental and thought-provoking feature of habit is the way it combines repetition and change. No being can acquire a habit unless it has the capacity to be changed by repetition. As Gilles Deleuze pointed out in his 1956 book on Hume's philosophy, *Empiricism and Subjectivity*, and elaborated ten years later in *Difference and Repetition*, there is something mysterious and paradoxical about the fact that repetition produces a difference.<sup>21</sup> And in the case of religious practices that seek some kind of self-transcendence—liberation from suffering, union with God or a vision of God, redemption from sin, enlightenment from ignorance—we are considering the possibility that not just a change but a transformation might result from repetition.

Thinking about *how* repetition produces its effects is a distinctively philosophical task. The kind of change in question here is a change in the nature of a thing, a change

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<sup>20</sup> See Félix Ravaissan, *Of Habit* (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 71.

<sup>21</sup> See Gilles Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity*, translated by Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 68; *Difference and Repetition*, translated by Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 70.



in its powers of motion and rest—roughly in accordance with Aristotle’s definition of a nature, in the *Physics*, as an inner principle of motion and rest.<sup>22</sup> If I chip away at a stone with a hammer and chisel, my repeated movements will change the shape of the stone, but they will not change its nature. However, my own nature will be changed, however slightly, as I practice the art of sculpture and become quicker, more precise, more sensitive in my chiselling. In the *Eudemian Ethics* Aristotle uses a different example of a stone to illustrate the conditions of habit-acquisition: however many times a stone is thrown up into the air, he explains, it will never acquire the habit of ascending rather than descending—because a stone does not have a nature, in the sense of an inner principle of motion and rest.<sup>23</sup> And yet, we might add, the person throwing the stone *will* be affected by the repetition: she may become fatigued or bored; her arm may become stronger; she may become more proficient in her throwing.

We can identify two basic conditions of habit-formation: receptivity to change and resistance to change. If we were not receptive to changes—and by changes I mean both sensations produced by external stimuli, and our own movements—then our experiences and our actions would make no difference to us. In habit, we not only yield to external influence: we are inescapably receptive to ourselves, formed as the (often unintended) consequence of our own movements. But if we were not also resistant to change, each new experience or action would transform us: entirely subject to circumstance, we would be empty, with no stable character of our own. Neither absolute receptivity nor absolute resistance allow a being to have a *nature*.

These twin conditions of receptivity and resistance are captured by the concept of plasticity, now a key term in neuroscience. William James, one of the great philosophers of habit, defines plasticity as “the possession of a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once.” James argues that “the phenomena of habit in living beings are due to the plasticity of the organic materials of which their bodies are composed.”<sup>24</sup>

One disadvantage of the modern concept of plasticity is that, having been claimed by neuroscientists, it is frequently applied in a narrowly materialist sense to the brain, rather than to a more inclusive conception of embodied life. For example, Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological account “the lived body” includes being-in-a-world, being-with-others, interpretations, affects, and so on. Merleau-Ponty regards habit as fundamental to the formation of this lived body.<sup>25</sup> But, as I emphasise in this essay, following Ravaissan, the lived body—the site of plasticity—is constituted above all by desire. Desires and inclinations permeate all the elements of meaning-imbued experience identified by Merleau-Ponty.

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<sup>22</sup> Aristotle, *Physics* II, 192b 20-23; see Sarah Waterlow, *Nature, Change and Agency in Aristotle’s Physics: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 1-45.

<sup>23</sup> Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics* 1120a-b.

<sup>24</sup> William James, *The Principles of Psychology, Volume 1* (New York: Henry Holt, 1890), p. 105.

<sup>25</sup> See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), pp. 104, 144.

With these considerations in mind—the importance of desire, and the requirement to expand our understanding of embodiment beyond a narrowly materialist view—I propose a concept of “flesh” as an alternative to plasticity. For our purposes, this theologically-rich term may retain all the ambivalence it has in biblical tradition. Flesh is both receptive and resistant to change: it is weak and yet durable, vulnerable and yet able to heal itself. In James’s words, flesh is “a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once.” Flesh is all that we are made of: it is both *where* and *how* we experience ourselves, inwardly and as the interface with the world. It is the site of feeling, sensation, thinking, interpretation—in a word, subjectivity. This concept of flesh calls attention to the spatial and temporal aspects of our embodiment. As well as moving through the world in a spatial sense, flesh grows, matures, decays, and bears visible signs of our temporality: it is our flesh that reveals to others the duration of our being-in-the-world. And this flesh—as indicated by ancient biblical usage—encompasses our desires and inclinations. It may be opposed to the spirit, as in both the Old and New Testaments, but it also signifies human nature in all its capacities. In Ezekiel, for example, God tells the Israelites: “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh” (36:26). Paul sometimes uses “flesh” (*sarx*) to signify weak or unregenerate human nature, but in 2 Corinthians he uses “flesh” and “spirit” (*pneuma*) interchangeably.<sup>26</sup>

#### 4. *Habit and practice: giving form to desire*

Emphasising the role of habit in human life allows us to think our life in connection with other animals, even plants, and to see this connectivity in terms of both continuity and difference. Because we have language and reflective, reflexive consciousness, habit opens itself up within us in a specific way. We can not only reflect on habit, but also develop habits of reflection and reflexivity: we can cultivate attentiveness, for example. Thus in human life there is the possibility for *practice*, which is a certain employment and development of our capacity for habit-formation.

Within human life, the twin conditions of receptivity and resistance that underlie all habit-formation take on ethical and spiritual significance in addition to—and perhaps thereby altering—their ontological, biological and psychological significance. Ethical life involves becoming receptive to the good, to what is life-enhancing, and

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<sup>26</sup> See Cor. 7:5 and 2:13. The “works of the flesh” contrasted with the “fruit of the spirit” in Galatians 5 include mental attitudes such as jealousy and anger as well as sensual vices like fornication and drunkenness. On the “weakness of the flesh,” see Romans 6:19 and 8:3. In Colossians Paul writes that Christ has “reconciled in his fleshly body” those “who were once estranged and hostile in mind” (1:22).

resistant to negative, harmful influences. This receptivity and resistance have a cognitive dimension, of course: through experience, intuition, and guidance from others we may learn gradually to discern how the good feels, and to recognise the warning-signs of a wrong turning which may appear initially to be in our interests. Allowing the ontological, biological, psychological principles of receptivity and resistance to become ethical principles does not commit us to a specific moral framework. ‘The good’ may be conceived in terms of the will of God, or in less personalist metaphysical terms (as in Plato and Aristotle, for example), or naturalistically (as in Spinoza or in Buddhist ethics), or more pragmatically and subjectively.

As I mentioned in the preceding section of this essay, Ravaisson develops his philosophy of habit according to an ontology of desire. Like many philosophers and theologians—including Plato, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Spinoza and Schelling—Ravaisson regards desire as the fundamental animating principle of existence. All things, he argues early in his essay *De l’habitude*, desire existence and seek to persevere in their being.<sup>27</sup> He develops (in the post-Kantian philosophical context he inherited from Pierre Maine de Biran and Victor Cousin) Aristotle’s conception of *hexis*, which signifies the having or holding of a certain quality. Ravaisson understands habit as the way in which an entity holds itself in being. This “holding” need not imply a rigid fixing in a certain shape; on the contrary, it may be through movements, shifts and adaptations that a being preserves itself within a changing environment. For example, flowers change their form from day to night; trees change their form through the seasons of a year.

A plant’s pattern of growth—for example, spreading along the ground, climbing and twining, or shooting upwards—is a particular way of expressing a need for light, for water. Ultimately, such botanical habits express the plant’s “desire” to *be*. This usage indicates how habit in general can be understood as giving form to desire. Habits are specific, particular ways of meeting a general need or desire. To take an example from human life: we all have a need and desire for food, which through custom has been channelled, or particularised, into a desire for food at certain times of day—at lunchtime, for instance. This customary lunchtime hunger is further particularised into a habit of eating certain things for lunch—sandwiches, for instance. More particularly still, an individual may have a habit of frequenting a certain café, perhaps even sitting at a certain table in this café. So here a general or universal desire for food has been particularised within an individual’s life in a highly determinate way. Similarly, human beings have a general desire for love and attention, which through the relationships they form becomes particularised as a desire to be loved by a specific person, and often in specific ways. Habits *express* and *enact* desire; desire’s power manifests itself as repetition, and these repetitions can in turn strengthen and clarify desire, perhaps by

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<sup>27</sup> See Félix Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, translated by Clare Carlisle and Mark Sinclair (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 27.

converting it into a very specific need—as in the case of addiction—or by inclining an individual's entire being, her whole existence, in the direction of the desire.

This intimate connection between habit and desire is especially important in the context of religious practice. If life in general is animated by desire, the spiritual life is animated by desire for God, or for the Good. But the object of this spiritual desire is often indeterminate and elusive. The character of its indeterminacy is, of course, a theological question. To claim that God is infinite ascribes to this object (or so-called object) of desire a certain kind of constitutive indeterminacy, to which there corresponds a view of this desire's pursuit as never-ending, or at least lifelong. Alternatively, the satisfaction of spiritual desire may be conceived as attainable, yet dependent on certain conditions that are rarely realised and difficult to maintain. In either case, our spiritual desire is either always, or almost always, open-ended. Indeed, the very concept of a God who is infinite, transcendent, inexhaustible, who withdraws and hides its nature even as it reveals itself, is a kind of placeholder and also a guarantor of the openness of spiritual desire. Most theologians agree that God is not an object among objects; that God is “not a thing or a kind of thing,” as Herbert McCabe put it.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, in a Buddhist context, the quality of Enlightenment is often indicated by its formlessness and irreducibility to whatever can be represented in thought, language or images.

The religious life is structured by a tension between the openness of spiritual desire and the finitude of our human situation. We are temporally finite, of course (at least, we know that we are in this world temporarily), but we are also subject to what Sartre calls the “facticity” of our situation: our physical, social, material and historical definiteness, and limitation. This tension—between, as Kierkegaard puts it, the finite and the infinite—raises the very practical question of how to be existentially true to our desire for God. How can human beings express, or live out, their spiritual desire in the world? If we have a desire for God, *what do we do with this desire?* And religious practice is an answer—perhaps it is *the* answer—to this question. Practice gives determinate, concrete, particular form to our indeterminate spiritual desires. It quite literally gives us something to do with a desire that cannot be satisfied by any finite object or experience.

If we understand practice as a species of habit, this raises the question of how to distinguish practices—habits we deliberately cultivate—from those habits which, like animals, we fall into. This distinction lies in *the way in which repetition gives form to desire*. Accidental habits develop because desires for particular experiences—some kind of increase of pleasure or reduction of pain—find expression in repeated acts. This repetition produces a modification: a tendency, a capacity, a proficiency, or a need, which was not explicitly desired. Perhaps it was explicitly undesirable, as in the case of addiction. For example, no one desires to become an alcoholic, but people fall into this habit because they desire a particular drink—the next drink—when they desire the

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<sup>28</sup> Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (London, Continuum, 2005), p. 6.

particular experience that this drink will bring about. Each time this desire is satisfied, the craving is strengthened. Few smokers want to smoke thirty cigarettes a day; they may not even want to ‘be a smoker’ —but they want *this* cigarette, and wanting *this* cigarette turns them into a thirty-a-day smoker. To take a less unhealthy example: a person may not deliberately aim to be consistently punctual, but he wants to be on time for *this* meeting, and the repetition of this particular desire generates a habit of punctuality.

In practice, by contrast, practitioners desire the outcome of their repeated acts. Practitioners aim for, and seek to cultivate, the lasting modification of their selves which the practice will produce. Therefore they choose to repeat particular acts—for example, a musician or an athlete resolves to practice every day—even when they do not wish to undertake the particular act on a given occasion. The musician desires the capacity, the proficiency, perhaps the greater creative freedom that results from repeated practice, and therefore she sets the intention to play her instrument every day, even when she does not feel like playing. In practice, particular acts become subordinate to the end of repetition, and repetition is itself a means to the self-modification that arises through it. Practitioners cultivate the *difference* that repetition makes to themselves as repeating agents. This clearly distinguishes practice from accidental habit, in which repetition and the modification it produces are simply unintended consequences of acting on particular desires.

It is common for practitioners to experience inner resistance to the particular acts which constitute their regular practice. This resistance may take the form of temptation to skip the practice, or a feeling of boredom or annoyance towards the practice. Such resistance is not essential to practice, but it is a common phenomenon and we encounter it in religious practice too. Some days a practitioner may look forward to the time set aside for prayer or meditation, or to going to Mass; at other times she can’t be bothered, or feels inclined to do something else. In practice, then, we see an elevation of desire beyond short-term appetites and wishes. Sloterdijk calls this “vertical tension,” and argues that without it “no purposeful practising is possible.”<sup>29</sup> In practice, the animating desire concerns not just what practitioners want to do, or what they want to experience, but who they want to be.

##### 5. Conclusion: habit, practice, grace

Here I have outlined an account of practice that offers a naturalistic, humanistic model for understanding religious practices philosophically. This account can enter easily into dialogue with the social sciences, with cognitive and behavioural psychology, with neuroscience, because the concept of habit provides a bridge to these disciplines. The

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<sup>29</sup> Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life*, p. 14.

account is also applicable to diverse religious, spiritual and ethical traditions, and this inclusivity is part of what makes it properly philosophical.

On the other hand, philosophy of religion needs to accommodate theological ways of thinking. If a philosopher of religion is unable to engage with concepts such as sin, grace, transcendence and existential liberation, then she will struggle to do justice to her subject-matter. As I remarked in the second section of this essay, from his Nietzschean perspective Sloterdijk seems to have decided in advance that religious practices are entirely for, by and of human beings: he calls these practices “anthropotechniques.” This seems to preclude the possibility that some religious practices, at least some of the time, give form not just to a human being’s desire, but to a relationship between human and non-human—let’s say divine—powers. A philosopher of religion needs to accommodate this possibility, although, unlike the theologian, she is not entitled to assume it.

We may, then, supplement the distinction between habit and practice with a distinction between practice and grace. By grace I mean the activities and effects of spiritual powers or forces within our world. This is of course a familiar idea within Christian theology, but there is something like this in Buddhism too: I have heard several Buddhist teachers remind their students that the process of awakening is not wholly, or even primarily, their own doing. They have described the practice as a matter of letting this natural process unfold within each person: “leave it to the dhamma,” counsels one influential Buddhist teacher, just as Christians are taught to put their trust in God.

The distinction between habit and practice reveals continuities between them, since they share a structure of repetition which gives form to desire, according to the twin conditions of receptivity and resistance to change. Analogously, the distinction between practice and grace signals continuities between natural and supernatural phenomena. To put this point in more theological terms, practice is the middle term between nature and grace. While habit and practice share an anthropology that views beings as desiring subjects, grace complements this anthropology with the idea that beings are desired as well as desiring: they are objects of desire as well as subjects of desire. That God desires us just as we desire him; that God desires our freedom and happiness on our behalf; that there are cosmic forces at work which give momentum and ease to our spiritual endeavours is, of course, a matter of faith. Such faith might be based on experience, on reason, on trust in a teacher or a text; some people hold this faith while others do not, and some desire faith while others do not; faith may wax and wane, build up or collapse, even in those who desire it fervently. So it is existentially important as well as philosophically important that religious practice is intelligible naturalistically, anthropotechnically, while leaving open and respecting the possibility that practice enacts, embodies, gives form to what Catholic tradition calls cooperative grace: the cooperation of human and divine desire, like swimming along with a river’s current.

Having admitted, if only provisionally, a threefold model of habit, practice and grace, we may then begin to think philosophically about continuities and discontinuities between these three forms of repetition within the religious life. How do these repetitions strengthen one other, or put pressure on one other, or come into conflict with one another?

Kierkegaard, for example, argues forcefully that religious practice should never become a habit.<sup>30</sup> This would close down the openness of spiritual desire, which makes it desire for God and not idolatry. At the same time, Kierkegaard insists on the particularity of the religious life: he emphasises that grace is given and received in the world in a specific moment, in a particular situation, a determinate concrete form. The divine gift is not life in general, or love in general, but *this particular existence* in all its detail, all its petty cares and pleasures and sufferings. God does not simply give Abraham a son: he gives him Isaac; he does not simply demand faith: he gives precise instructions about the journey to Mount Moriah and what should happen there. For Ravaisson, by contrast, the highest kind of spiritual desire is a “desire that forgets itself,” through becoming embodied and appropriated as a second nature, through repetition, so that it becomes as natural and spontaneous as habit.

I'll end with the image of a spiritual path. This is a powerful image, which Schilbrack illuminates by means of conceptual metaphor theory: this metaphor encourages us to see religious life as embodied life. The account of habit and practice (and perhaps grace) outlined here enriches this metaphor and imbues it with philosophical content—for the pathway is an enduring metaphor for habit. It was invoked by Malebranche and Locke in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, for example, and contemporary neuroscientists make the concept of a neural pathway central to their theories of the brain.<sup>31</sup> Reflection on the image of a spiritual path brings to light the communality of religious life, which has remained in the background of my discussion of habit and practice, alongside other structural features such as temporality and virtuality.

The pathways we encounter in the countryside are formed collectively: they testify to communal repetition. When we walk along a path, we both follow the steps of those who have gone before us (and so we may remember them with gratitude), and preserve the path for those who will come later. In this respect, the spiritual pathway signifies *tradition*, which to some extent guides almost all religious practice. The pathway metaphor also discloses the temporality of habit and practice, both within the long *durée* of a spiritual tradition and within the lifetime of an individual. The steps practitioners have taken both echo and anticipate those of other people; as walkers on the path, practitioners become exemplars as well as followers. Their steps along the path form the direction, the inclination, of their existence: they have come *this way*, not another, and they are *here*, not there. The pathway thus gives a determinacy to their existence, a specific shape to their being in the world. On the other hand, this

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<sup>30</sup> See Clare Carlisle, *On Habit* (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 121-9.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23-7.

metaphor should not imply an over-determined model of religious life: the open-endedness of spiritual desire is integral to its authenticity. Even though we may be able to see the way ahead, at least on a clear day, the pathway that stretches before us still has a kind of virtuality. This belongs to the ontology of habit, going back to Aristotle's analysis of dispositions: we can distinguish the (latent, potential) pathway from the (active, actual) walking along the path. In a sense, then, the pathway comes into being anew with each repetition.